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PASS: Department of Defense

FROM : Amembassy LONDON

DATE: March 21, 1969

SUBJECT: ABMs

REF

Attached is an article by Leonard Beaton which appeared in the TIMES of 18 March on the President's ABM decision. The article in question is the best reasoned and most persuasive that we have seen to date in the British press on ABMs and as such we would commend it to the Department.

KAISER

Attachment:

As stated

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Drafted by:

POL/M:JDStoddart/jl

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THE TIMES, March 19, 1969

No man of good will can welcome the decline of American confidence in the present structure of nuclear forces and their evident moves towards a new generation of weapons. Each change must replace something which is now more or less understood with something whose implications cannot be predicted. It must also produce responses in others, and if the past is anything to go on these will not be the responses which were expected.

So it is not surprising that any plan for missile defences is widely attacked by those who are concerned about building the peace. But the new missile defence programme brought forward by President Nixon as his first major defence decision deserves well of the critics. It is enlightened and (if sustained) courageous. Its superiority over the Johnson/McNamara plan is unmistakable.

What Mr. Nixon has done is to abandon the pretence that the United States was building missile defences against China and linked them specifically to the immense rise in the Soviet intercontinental missile forces. At the same time, he has declared that American cities cannot be defended against Soviet missile attack and formally withdrawn the plans to surround them with rocket defences. He is able to claim that he is reducing the damage the Russians can do in a surprise attack on American nuclear forces: and this must help to secure the peace. He is also able to claim that the Russian capacity for retaliation against American cities is not affected: and so the Russian deterrent to western attack remains effective.

This is enlightened strategic thinking at a point where great nations cannot afford to be irre-

LEONARD BEATON

Nixon's wise arms choice



sponsible. One reason for this is probably the remarkable response of American public opinion to the Sprint bases, with their nuclear warheads, being planned around their cities. It had been expected that the public would demand defences against the growing missile forces of the Chinese and the Russians.

On the contrary, a public which had never noticed that they had anti-bomber defences based on missiles with nuclear warheads responded to the proposed Sprints as the Great Duke did to his troops: they might not scare the enemy but by God they frightened him.

This unexpected public response provided a superb opportunity, and it has been taken. President Nixon still says, as Mr. McNamara used to say, that if there was a way to put a complete defence over the United States it would be taken, no matter what the cost. But what he is doing is to avoid complicating the Russian deterrent problem. If the Russian debate is anything like the American debate, the prospect of missile defences of American cities has been used to justify greatly increased numbers of weapons to be sure of getting through. But these new weapons, once built, must then be

interpreted by the Americans as a threat to their retaliatory forces.

The suggestion that the priority was China led directly to an attempt to defend cities. But the real American problem, as Mr. McNamara recognized, is the immense increase in Soviet nuclear forces which has been going on for several years and shows no sign of stopping. No doubt the Americans brought this on themselves by claims of superiority and by building in the early 1960s a large force able to wipe out Russian retaliatory forces on the ground. But the Soviet response has now gone very far and is posing a growing threat to the American Minuteman missile force and to the bomber bases.

By making their missile defences a deliberate and specific response to this, the American Administration have made a major contribution to starting a downward spiral. They have made it clear that this is their intention by saying that the whole programme for 12 defensive bases will only be put into effect in stages and that these stages will depend on the development of the Russian threat.

"Our deployment", the President said, "is subject to modification as the threat changes, either through negotiations or

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through unilateral action by the Soviet Union or communist China."

Several other things should be said. First, Mr. Nixon has slowed down the original programme and so saved himself some money for the coming year's budget. Secondly, he has taken advantage of the new start to order later radars to try to handle the new Russian low-level missiles. (This modification was already being considered as a result of the increasing Soviet effort on missiles of this kind.) Thirdly, he is retaining and extending the general area defence of the whole country against missiles which it is hoped the long-range Spartan missile will provide. There will be seven long-range radars for these instead of the planned six; and it may well be that these will be facing south as well as north.

This programme points directly at the Soviet-American negotiation and makes a direct link between Russian weapons and American responses. It is obvious that if the Russian offensive force goes on growing and (as must be assumed) becomes increasingly accurate, the Americans will have to respond.

Mr. Nixon says that the plans for making the Minuteman bases very much more secure do not give adequate protection against what he called "foreseeable advances" in the accuracy of the Russian weapons. So he has three choices: more weapons; a return to mobility on trains or vehicles; or large missile agglomerations (the convoys of the nuclear age) with so many defensive missiles that to exhaust them would be immensely costly. But then there is the fourth alternative: Russian abandonment of the forces able to hit these missiles on the ground. That is the real objective.

So long as the American force being protected contains far more weapons that could possibly be needed for retaliation alone, the Russians will balk at this argument. American pressure for limits to the Russian build-up will be met with Russian pressure for reciprocity.

But we may find when these negotiations start—perhaps in the autumn—that the real Russian anxiety is to avoid the vast expenditure involved in embarking on missile defences and the American anxiety is to limit the numbers of offensive forces. This is the precise opposite of what both were thought to be looking for a year or two ago. Both sides need agreement and both are undoubtedly prepared to try to achieve a more stable confrontation. What will make it difficult is mutual mistrust, not the doubtful catalytic effect of a China which is deterred as effectively as Britain or France from nuclear adventuring against the giants.

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